

Thoreau: An Exemplar of Individual Freedom

By Keiko Beppu

If Rousseau rhapsodizes that “Man is born free; and everywhere he is in chains,”¹ Thoreau is convinced and wishes to illustrate by his own example that man is born free and has every right to remain free. Or else what is man? this arch-individualist would ask. As a plant dies if it cannot live according to its nature, so man dies if he is denied this inalienable right. However, the problem is not so simple as Thoreau presents it. That man is free by nature is true, but so it is that “in society and in the State, to which he necessarily belongs, he must limit this natural freedom.”² There is a contradiction inherent in the principle that “the State is the realization of freedom,” which we now accept as the first premise. And if we agree with Hegel that the impersonal Spirit realizes itself in time, subordinating all the special claims to its universal claim, how is this “high Idea” to be united with human freedom? This short essay is the upshot of a dialogue I have been carrying on with myself concerning the above question.

It is not the immediate concern here to investigate whether Hegel had any direct influence on Thoreau; there is no such evidence in the latter's life nor scholarship to support such a surmise. However, a striking parallel can be drawn between Hegel's concept of the “person” or “transcender,” as Mr. Hartman interprets it,³ and Thoreau's uncompromising individualism. In what follows I'd like to illuminate the nature of the unique individual freedom envisioned in Thoreau's works: mainly in *Walden* and “Civil Disobedience.”

But first to clarify Hegel's idea of “transcender.” In the Hegelian scheme, the state has precedence over any particular individual. Hegel contends that what is considered as limitation of freedom—suppressed

impulses, desires and passions belonging to a particular individual—is the very condition leading to liberation, and that “society and the state are the very condition in which freedom is realized.”⁴ The purpose and gratification of individuals are necessarily sacrificed to the universal purpose. Yet, Hegel concedes, that there is one aspect of human individuality which must be excluded from the above scheme: “an element which absolutely not subordinate but exists in individuals as essentially eternal and divine.”⁵ Mr. Hartman concludes in his introductory essay to Hegel’s *Reason in History* that Hegel is the only philosopher who gives a systematic place to the unique value of the individual.⁶ Man need not be an “object of history”; he can be an end in himself by virtue of the divine in him. Here is a realm, then, for such a “transcender” as Thoreau who follows his own inner light—“a specific existence devoted to the attainment of one aim.”⁷ For Hegel, however, this “person” who transcends the social morality is not the primary concern; his interest as a historian lies in the “World Historical” person, the hero such as Julius Caesar or Napoleon. But we wonder: if Hegel had developed his idea of the “person,” he might have considered a host of great poets and artists, who transcend time and space, as subjects of future history if not of the immediate present.

Henry David Thoreau is an example of such “transcender,” who believes in “the eternal and divine in man.” Man is free according to the very concept of man; he is responsible only for the inner voice of his conscience. Therefore, Thoreau is downright condescending toward his contemporaries who find themselves in chains with “all the uses of the world.” “Talk of a divinity in man!” (*Walden*, 5)⁸ he ejaculates. Their life of servitude is self-imposed, because their vision does not penetrate the surface of things. If Negro slavery is evil, the worst is when man becomes the slave-driver of himself. The mass of men lead the life of conformity,

for it is easy in the world to follow the opinion of the world; they are Hegel's "objects of history." Thoreau tried to show, by opposition, the increasing subserviency of man to property, by which he believed his fellow citizens were leading the lives of "quiet desperation" in mid-nineteenth century New England.

On July 4, 1845, Thoreau went to the woods, not to escape from "the chopping sea of civilized life" nor to live in solitude after his own fashion, but "to live deliberately, to front only the essential facts of life" (*Walden*, 74). This orientation in nature should not be confused with the "back to nature" primitivism. Rather it must be understood as a religious retreat or in the transcendental context, as Thoreau writes in his poem, appropriately or humorously entitled "The Apology" (1846):

Think me not unkind and rude
That I walk alone in grove and glen;
I go to the god of the wood
To fetch his word to men.

Tax not my sloth that I
Fold my arms beside the brook;
Each cloud that floated in the sky
Writes a letter in my book.

Chide me not, laborious band,
For the idle flowers I brought;
Every aster in my hand
Goes home loaded with a thought.

There was never mystery
But 't is figured in the flowers;
Was never secret history
But birds tell it in the bowers.

One harvest from thy field
Homeward brought the oxen strong;
A second crop thine acres yield
Which I gather in a song.⁹

Thoreau's inward eye turned natural objects, a cloud, woods, or an aster,

into something spiritual. Thoreau went, as he says, to Walden Pond to fetch the god's word to men, which he later gathered in a song: *Walden*.

For the transcendentalist nature is but a proving ground of man's capacity "to see into the life of things." He believes that man can and should transcend the ordinary sense experience in order to attain knowledge. However intense his immersion in nature, Thoreau is always conscious of a certain doubleness in him: "We are not wholly involved in Nature, I may be either the driftwood in the stream, or Indra in the sky looking down on it, . . . I only know myself as a human entity; the scene, so to speak, of thoughts and affections; and am sensible of a certain doubleness by which I can stand as remote from myself as from another" (*Walden*, 111). It is not nature but man's moral sense that reveals to him the true nature of the universe.¹⁰ Hence, man must cultivate "the discipline of looking always at what is to be seen" (*Walden*, 91), so that he may, by habit, see invisible realities and spiritual objects. Standing on the bare ground, Emerson describes such transcendental experience as follows: "... my head bathed by the blithe air and uplifted into infinite space,—all mean egotism vanishes, I become a transparent eyeball; I am nothing; I see all; the currents of the Universal Being circulate through me; I am part or parcel of God."¹¹ Fronting "only the essential facts of life," Thoreau too becomes "a transparent eyeball." By virtue of this metaphysical experience "the eternal world and [the] deepest and holiest region of man's mind merge, fuse, as it were, become identified."¹²

Now let us take a day and follow Thoreau at Walden. His typical day begins with the dawn: "Every morning was a cheerful invitation to make my life of equal simplicity, and I may say innocence, with Nature herself. I have been as sincere a worshipper of Aurora as the Greeks. I got up early and bathed in the pond; that was a religious exercise" (*Walden*, 72).

He associates morning with spring, as a day is an epitome of a year. "The morning, which is the most memorable season of the day, is the *awakening* hour. The millions are awake enough for physical labor; but only one in a million are awake enough for effective intellectual exertion, only one in a hundred millions to a poetic or divine life. To *be awake* is to *be alive*" (*Walden*, 73. My italics). As Thoreau boasts, *Walden* is not his "dejection ode," but there he proposes to "brag as lustily as Chanticleer in the morning, . . . if only to wake my neighbors up" (*Walden*, 69). What Thoreau intends in *Walden* is evident from the images and motor verbs which recur in the book: dawn, morning, spring, grass, Aurora, rainbow, and "to wake," "to be awake," "to live deeply," and "suck out all the marrow of life." *Walden* is a myth of renewal: we must be awakened each morning by our newly acquired force and aspiration to a higher life than we have known before.

After his customary bath in the pond, Thoreau sits before his door, rapt in revery, until he is reminded of the lapse of time by the noise of some traveller's wagon. Yet such hours are not "time subtracted from [his] life, but so much over and above [his] usual allowance" (*Walden*, 91-92). For every cloud in the sky writes a letter in his book, and every aster in his hand is loaded with a thought. Thoreau realizes what the Orientals mean by contemplation and the forsaking of works; such is the privilege he enjoys in the woods, fronting "only the essential facts of life."

However, Thoreau is not a mere ascetic hermit; he is quite capable of feeling "a strange thrill of savage delight." When he is walking home one evening, he is tempted to seize a woodchuck and devour it raw. He records of the incident: "I found in myself, and still find, an instinct toward a higher, or, as it is named, spiritual life, . . . and another toward a primitive rank and savage one, and I reverence them both. I love the

wild not less than the good" (*Walden*, 176). He proceeds to generalize: "there is a period in the history of the individual, as of the race, when the hunters are the best men" (*Walden*, 178). However, as the higher nature awakens, man learns to distinguish his proper objects and leaves the gun and fish-pole behind: the animal and the spiritual co-exist in man in the reverse ratio. If man listens to "the faintest but constant suggestions of his genius," the road lies that way, for his "whole life is startlingly moral." Thoreau can be quite parochial too much of the time; but it is quite natural. If he is a Puritan in that he makes no compromise when his conscience is at stake and defies the state, he is as good a Puritan in that he is a man of simple habits, straightforward and prayerful. He extolls the virtue of exertion and chastity: "If you would avoid uncleanness, and all the sins, work earnestly" (*Walden*, 185); "man flows at once to God when the channel of purity is open, . . . He is blessed who is assured that the animal is dying out in him day by day, and the divine being established" (*Walden*, 184). In order to live a life of "higher laws," man should practise some new austerity every day, for on this ground alone can man be free. As Hegel concedes, man can be an end in himself only by virtue of the divine in him. The Walden experiment offered Thoreau one sustained opportunity of opening the channel of purity, which helped nourish his uncompromising individualism.

As the episode of his wild delight in a woodchuck is developed into the chapter, "Higher Laws"—a pivotal one in the book,—so the coming of spring leads Thoreau to a Goethean coda of immortality:

Ah! I have penetrated to those meadows on the morning of many a first spring day, . . . when the wild river valley and the woods were bathed in so pure and bright a light as would have *waked the dead*, if they had been slumbering in their graves, as some suppose. There needs no stronger proof of immortality. All

things must live in such a light. O Death, where was thy sting?
O Grave, where was thy victory? (*Walden*, 264-265. My italics).

Thus each experience Thoreau encountered in the woods led him to contemplation and to wisdom. It is quite plausible to see *Walden* as a series of epiphanies he experienced by the pure clear water of Walden Pond. Thoreau went to the woods "to live deliberately" and "to drive life into a corner," and he learned that life is sublime and man can be sublime, too, if he follows "the faintest but constant suggestions of his genius." Now the "sojourner in civilized life" who returned from the woods must perpetuate the independence of solitude which he acquired or re-acquired, because "the great man is he who in the midst of the crowd keeps with perfect sweetness the independence of solitude."¹³ This is not a difficult task for one of Thoreau's caliber.

During his sojourn at Walden, Thoreau was arrested and put in jail for having refused to pay a poll-tax for six years; the incident is casually recorded in *Walden* (142-143). Out of the experience came the famous "Civil Disobedience." He eulogizes his prison experience: "I saw that if there was a wall of stone between me and my townsmen there was a still more difficult one to climb or break through before they could get to be as free as I was" ("Civil Disobedience," 295). The episode only confirmed him more than ever of his freedom and independence and of the folly of the state.

Unlike Hegel, to whom the state is the supreme concern, for Thoreau the individual—his person and property—is more important. If the political expediency and the law of morality clash, it is the duty of the individual citizen to follow his own conscience. Otherwise man need not have conscience. "We would be men first, and subjects afterward.... The only obligation which I have a right to assume is to do at any time what

I think right" ("Civil Disobedience," 282). What Thoreau proposes in "Civil Disobedience" or in "A Plea for Captain John Brown" is to insist on the right of the individual over any form of government as it existed in his time or in any time. For "there will never be a really free and enlightened state until the state comes to recognize the individual as a higher and independent power, from which all its power and authority are derived, and treats him accordingly" ("Civil Disobedience," 304). This is an impossibility, if not improbable. However, the position Thoreau takes here must not be confused with anarchism. To be able to say as Thoreau does, we must first learn to respect ourselves, convinced of the divine in us. It is easy to imitate his "civil disobedience" but difficult to follow his discipline of self-reliance. There is an old maxim that reads: little learning is a dangerous thing.

It is wide of the mark then to label Thoreau as an anarchist thinker, just as it is wrong to accuse him of inaction on the ground that he did not organize a movement for the abolition of slavery which he believed to be evil. He did assist a Negro slave to escape to Canada, which he again quite casually records in *Walden*. He was one of the first to visit John Brown in prison and defend him. There is much fervor and affection in his "Plea for Captain John Brown" he read before the citizens of Concord in 1859. In a way the militant abolitionist was what Thoreau himself might have been, if he had been a "soldier." The qualities he admired in John Brown are the very qualities which constitute Thoreau himself. He writes of John Brown: "He was a man of Spartan habits. . . A man of rare common sense and directness of speech, as of action; a *transcendentalist* above all, a man of ideals and principles,—that was what distinguished him. Not yielding to a whim or transient impulse, but carrying out the purpose of a life."¹⁴ At the same time the plea echoes much

of such indictment of the unjust government as voiced in "Civil Disobedience."

Yet Thoreau did not despair of the existing social condition. He writes: "I rejoice that I live in this age, that I am his [John Brown's] contemporary."¹⁵ Even during his Walden years, he was aware of social life. Contemplating on the railroad track, which distracts and destroys the serenity of Walden Pond, he explains, "I usually go to the village [either on errand or for gossip] along its causeway, and am, as it were, related to society by this link" (*Walden*, 94). And since he was as desirous of being a good citizen as he was of being a bad subject, he tells us that he never declined to pay the highway tax. Or more directly he admits the necessity of the government: "to speak practically and as a citizen, unlike those who call themselves no-government men, I ask for, not at once no government, but at once a better government" ("Civil Disobedience," 282). Moreover, he is hopeful of one day realizing "a still more perfect and glorious state" ("Civil Disobedience," 304). However, this Thoreau proposes on the individual basis, he is too much of the individualist to believe that the problems of life are solved on the community basis. As he believes in "the eternal and divine in man," he is confident of man's potentiality to "erect himself above himself." Only the enlightened man and the individual's awareness of wrong can bring about a lasting reform and a glorious government. Therefore, Thoreau is more optimistic than Rousseau who complains that "we know for ourselves that we must put up with a bad government when it is there."¹⁶ To Rousseau man is only as good as the government makes him. The difference here, and it is a great one, is which will take the initiative, the government or the individual. Passivity seems to be a predominant trait in Rousseau; he hoped that the Bernese would make the island—the place of his retirement in his later years—his

prison for life so that he could stay there the rest of his life.¹⁷ Great as he is, Rousseau seems, unlike the autonomous Thoreau, to be an "other-directed" person. Thoreau is convinced that if injustice exists in the world, it is the duty of the individual to redeem it, if it be in a negative way of being "a counter friction to stop the machine" ("Civil Disobedience," 290). The scheme of things as it is, for no matter for what good purpose a government is established, it too soon becomes institutionalized,¹⁸ it is only through our individual consciousness of wrong as wrong, as Thoreau suggests, that we can redeem ourselves and eventually our society.

As has been mentioned, Thoreau defies the authority of the state; he is nevertheless very close to Hegel in believing that "World history is the progress of the consciousness of freedom." In "Civil Disobedience" Thoreau contends that "the progress from an absolute to a limited monarchy, from a limited monarchy to a democracy, is a progress toward a true respect for the individual" ("Civil Disobedience," 303). And Hegel in *Reason in History* maintains: . . . with the Orientals only one is free, with the Greeks some are free and only the Germanic peoples, through Christianity, realize that man as man is free.¹⁹ We come to a conclusion that for both Thoreau and Hegel the progress of freedom coincides with the increased value accorded to the individual. The difference resides in the emphasis, with Thoreau on the individual and with Hegel on the state. And both will agree with Goethe that "Freedom and life belong to that man solely / Who must reconquer them each day."²⁰ Freedom is gained and re-gained only through "an infinite process of discipline of knowledge and will power." Thoreau's great poem, *Walden*, also ends on a hopeful note. The images of dawn, sun, morning recur: "Only that day dawns to which we are awake. There is more day to dawn. The sun is but a morning star" (*Walden*, 287).

The philosophical conclusions of Thoreau's meditation at Walden Pond have been transformed into *Walden* the work of art so that we also can share what Thoreau has seen in and through the pure clear water of the pond. The life Thoreau presents in *Walden* or his life itself becomes a symbol of the individual freedom which every one hopes to attain. Yet how it can be attained must be solved by each individual. Thoreau would not want us to adopt *his* mode of living, but he would encourage us to find *our* own way. It is your life, this arch-individualist seems to say, what you make of it—whether you'll be an object of history, a hero, or a transcender—is entirely up to you. And he is not making an exorbitant demand.

In the Conclusion of *Walden*, Thoreau tells an episode of the artist who strives for perfection in making a staff. The artist's singleness of purpose and resolution gives him perennial youth. "As he made no compromise with Time," he explains, "Time kept out of his way" (*Walden*, 272). Here Thoreau seems to imply that by means of the immortality of art man will be able to transcend time and nature. When all is told, Thoreau seems to have been more at home in solitude and in the world of art. To be sure, an affecting human event made him blind to natural objects. But such an affecting human event as John Brown's execution was rare, and he "attended more to nature than to man."²¹ He was content to be free if only in his destination and in himself, content to be "a specific existence devoted to the attainment of one aim." If Thoreau were accused of *hubris* for his "clear flame" of uncompromising individualism, from which no Transcendental or Romantic idealist is immune, he could only offer a poem of prayer to the gods:

Light-winged Smoke, Icarian bird
Melting thy pinions in thy upward flight,
Lark without song, and messenger of dawn,
Circling above the hamlets as thy nest;
Or else, departing dream, and shadowy form
Of midnight vision, gathering thy skirts;
By night star-veiling, and by day
Darkening the light and blotting out the sun;
Go thou my incense upward from this hearth,
And ask the gods to pardon this clear flame.
("Smoke," *Walden*, 211)

Notes

1. Jean-Jacques Rousseau, *The Social Contract*, tr. G. D. H. Cole (New York, 1913), p. 5.
2. G. W. F. Hegel, *Reason in History*, tr. Robert S. Hartman (New York, 1953), p. 54.
3. Robert S. Hartman, "Introduction," *Reason in History*, p. xxxiv
4. *Reason in History*, p. 55.
5. *Ibid.*, p. 44.
6. Robert S. Hartman, "Introduction," *Reason in History*, p. xxxv.
7. *Reason in History*, p. 29.
8. All the references in this form are to Henry David Thoreau's *Walden and Civil Disobedience*, ed. Norman Holmes Pearson (New York, 1966).
9. Quoted in Richard Ruland's "Introduction," *Twentieth Century Interpretations of Walden*, ed. Richard Ruland (New York, 1968), pp. 3-4.
10. Joseph Warren Beach, *The Concept of Nature in Nineteenth-Century English Poetry* (New York, 1956), p. 362.
11. Ralph Waldo Emerson, "Nature," *Essays*, ed. Arthur Hobson Quinn (New York, 1920), p. 5.
12. David Ferry, *The Limits of Mortality* (Connecticut, 1959), p. 29.
13. Emerson, "Self-Reliance," *Essays*, p. 81.
14. Henry David Thoreau, "A Plea for Captain John Brown," *Writings of Henry David Thoreau* (Boston, 1893), X, 202. My italics.
15. *Ibid.*, p. 218.
16. *The Social Contract*, p. 67.
17. Rousseau, *The Confessions*, tr. J. M. Cohen (Baltimore, 1954), p. 596.
18. Walter Roy Harding, *A Thoreau Handbook* (New York, 1959), p. 146.
19. *Reason in History*, pp. 23-24.
20. Johann Wolfgang von Goethe, *Faust*, tr. Charles E. Passage (New York, 1965), Part II, Act V, ll. 11575-6.
21. "A Plea for Captain John Brown," *Writings*, p. 237.

SELECTED BIBLIOGRAPHY

Beach, Joseph Warren. *The Concept of Nature in Nineteenth-Century English Poetry*. New York: Pageant Book Company, 1956.

Emerson, Ralph Waldo. *Essays*. ed. Arthur Hobson Quinn. New York: Charles Scribners and Sons, 1920.

Ferry, David. *The Limits of Mortality*. Connecticut: Wesleyan University Press, 1959.

Goethe, Johann Wolfgang von. *Faust*. tr. Charles E. Passage. New York: The Bobbs-Merrill Company, 1965.

Harding, Walter Roy. *A Thoreau Handbook*. New York: New York University Press, 1959.

Hartman, Robert S. "Introduction," *Reason in History*. New York: The Bobbs-Merrill Company, 1953.

Hegel, G. W. F. *Reason in History*. tr. Robert S. Hartman. New York: The Bobbs-Merrill Company, 1953.

Rousseau, Jean-Jacques. *The Confessions*. tr. J. M. Cohen. Baltimore: Penguin Books, 1954.

_____ *The Social Contract*. tr. G. D. H. Cole. New York: Dutton, 1913.

Ruland, Richard. ed. *Twentieth Century Interpretations of Walden: A Collection of Critical Essays*. New York: Prentice-Hall, 1968.

Thoreau, Henry David. *Collected Poems of Henry David Thoreau*. ed. Carl Bode. Baltimore: The Johns Hopkins Press, 1964.

_____ *Walden and Civil Disobedience*. ed. Norman Holmes Pearson. New York: Holt, Rinehart and Winston, 1966.

_____ *Writings of Henry David Thoreau*. Vol. X. Boston: Houghton Mifflin and Company, 1893.